

"EXILED FROM GOD'S COUNTRY"

When Bill Habersham, of Windmill Fame, Thought He Killed a Man in Painted Rock.

—BY MORLEY ROBERTS Author of "The Adventures of the Broad Arrow," "The Wingless Psyche," "Rachel Marr," and Many Other Stories.

ABOUT '85, if I remember rightly, there was an almighty frost in Florida, almost as bad as the one of '94, when the orange-trees were killed as far south as India River; and that was why Ben Habersham lifted stakes and came into Painted Rock. It was also the reason why I knew him, and it was the reason that Susy Habersham became acquainted with Samuel I. Weekes, who owned a cattle-ranch on the upper waters of Wolf Creek, a saloon at Big Springs and a store in Painted Rock itself.

Habersham was a big, loose-jointed, slop-built "Simple Simon," who took to erecting windmills for irrigation, as he had raked up an agency of some new kind of wind-fakement on the strength of which he came West. He worked for himself at first, and then became a partner, as far as windmills were concerned, with Weekes. He fitted up a number of them in the town. One he put up for Ginger Gillette, who had a great notion for flowers and fruit, both hard things to raise in the neighborhood of Painted Rock. He fixed another for my friend Gedge, the gambler from Georgia, who had a shack outside the city limits with what he delighted to call a "park." It was four acres of dust, sand and alkali and prairie-dogs, and his "vines" were a measly lot of creepers that died at the first south wind, if any survived the March norther. Habersham called Florida "God's country." When a man out West does that you may reckon him a failure. The man who doesn't fail is he who takes enough root for the time to forget the State he came from. That is what Ginger Gillette said and did.

"I don't reckon to palaver none about where I came from," said Ginger with decision, "nor do I reckon to wait any about what I left behind. There's a complete and finished set of plumb-rank failures howling in Painted Rock about this and that state being 'God's kentry.' They make me sick and tired. 'God's kentry' is finished, and the State of Texas is still on our hands to work up and put the polish on. But the woman is the worst at it. They don't remind me none of the women of '94 that old-timer tells about. They had grit and could stand off Injuns. These ladies can't stand off a mosquito, and they weep sadly at the centipede. Mis' Habersham's that kind, and can't cut a steak without making faces at the joint she hacks off with averted face. The woman from God's kentry ain't fit to raise Texans. They raise too much riot over trifles."

But she was a pretty little woman, and even the fastidious Ginger Gillette lowered his bull voice in her presence and was exceedingly polite when he met her on Main-st. The cow-boys said she was a "daisy," when they swaggered past her with cropped heads, a tooth-brush in their waistcoat pockets, and a high opinion of themselves in their little minds.

"There'll be trouble over Mis' Habersham yet," said "Keno" Gedge, who knew the world and had a wife who had been pretty enough to bring one man to the grave and two into the hospital before she quieted down in double harness. "She's a danger to this lonely society of baccheters, my son and you can lay what you like on it. If I was Habersham, I'd see she had no sort of conversation with Sam Weekes. Weekes ain't to be trusted with women—you can see that in his eye, if his record didn't prove it."

They said his record did prove it. "Does Habersham know it?" I asked. "Habersham don't know nothin'," said Gedge bitterly. "He knows enough about oranges to be froze out of Florida, and enough about windmills to set one up in any park that won't draw water."

"Keno" Gedge, according to Habersham, believed that a windmill created water in a dry well.

"We ain't on good terms over that dry windmill," said Gedge, "or I'd get Mrs. Gedge to drop him a hint that Weekes is after Mrs. Habersham. He's the only man in Painted Rock that don't see it."

That was true enough, as I found out after a month or so. There was an extraordinary reluctance among the quieter inhabitants of the town to say anything about the case. It was no one's business but Habersham's, and Habersham was just the man to kill there and then the fool who warned him. Nevertheless there was talk, and the baser-minded sort soon averred that the talk had a sound basis to go on. There was a strange row about this in the American saloon, which was characteristic of the place and its people, and for the matter of that of the west likewise. It was started by Sibley Ranger from Double Mountain Fork, who used to come into town and fill up beyond the limit of discretion once a fortnight.

"How's George Weekes' huntin' progressin'?" he asked Gedge, who was sitting on the bench with Pillsbury.

"Did you speak to me?" asked Gedge, with a danger-signal in his voice. "To you, 'Keno' Gedge," said Ranger, "to be sure I did. I asked how's Weekes' hunt after the Floridy lady goin' on? Is she caught yet?"

Gedge rose from his seat and walked up to him. He was little, but was as hard as wire, and now he was in a dangerous rage. "Mr. Ranger," he said in a voice that had a rasp in it, "do you know that it's admitted on all hands that you're the biggest fool that ever showed up in Painted Rock?"

Ranger's hand was lying on the bar and Gedge put his on it. Ranger found that alien grip immovable.

"You ain't for startin' a difficulty with me for sayin' what everyone says!" he asked quietly enough.

"If you say it again there will be trouble," said Gedge. "Do you understand me? There'll be serious trouble, and I don't want to hev' my business interrupted by being obliged to leave town till your funeral is forgotten."

Not a soul spoke a word. The bartender wiped a glass, put a bottle straight and stood quietly expectant.

"You talk high," said Ranger.

"I talk down to you," said Gedge.

Ranger showed for once an adequate sense of the situation. "Well, if you put it in that way," he said, "I reckon on I take it back. I'm not in you class as a shot. I own it, and if I was to follow my unreasonable desire and bash you with this tumbler I know I'd be dead and no use to my dependent relatives. It take it back, Gedge. I'll say no more about it. Set up the drinks, Tom."

And Habersham walked into the saloon just as we all made a move for the bar. No one thought any the worse of Ranger for "taking water." There are ways of doing it, and fool or none, he did it right.

"Habersham, drink with me and these guests," said Ranger. "Me and Gedge has been arguin', and Gedge hex won, I own it."

"What's the trouble?" asked Habersham, laughing.

"Gedge let on he reckoned me a fool," replied Ranger, "and a feeble discussion followed. I own I am a fool, and I'll stand nose-paint to prove it. How's windmills going? Is the wind sufficient to send 'em round? I'm thinkin' of havin' one fixed over to my ranch, and I'll grow roses ag'in' 'Keno' at his park."

That was the end of the trouble. But when talk had got so far, it was bound to go father, and it did. The elite of Painted Rock looked shy at Mrs. Habersham, who apparently never got so much as a hint upon the scandal. At any rate, she never willed under the public gaze and went about as gaily as ever. Gedge talked to me about her, and talked a little gloomily.

"One woman is all I care to understand," he said, "and I own freely after twenty-five years of matrimony that Mrs. Gedge is frequent as hard to fathom as Ginger Gillette when he starts bluffin' at poker. He's the best amateur at kyards in the country, and Pillsbury

owns it as I do. For all I know, Mis' Habersham may be bad down to bed-rock, or she may be no more than a pretty fool. There's times I put up one hypothesis, and there's times I argue from the other. Women are shorely sad enigmas and apt to cause woe. If Habersham hears any hint of what is spoken of I've a notion he'll go plumb mad and bring Mr. Weekes' career to a premature close—whether with justice or without I ain't just now inclined to state. There are times when the worst views of human natur' come natural, and therefore I'll wander over to the drug store and get Bailey to quote me a price on pills."

The next day I rode to Snyder, Scurry County, and stayed a week with Chapman, who kept the Snyder Saloon, and I missed the newer developments of the Habersham story. But I came in for the conclusion at any rate, for I met Sibley Ranger riding out when I came within ten miles of Painted Rock on my way back.

"Howdy!" said Sibley, and I replied "Howdy!" with all the cordiality of the phrase. He pulled up close to me, and our horses put their noses together.

"There's goin' to be trouble over to Painted Rock," said Sibley Ranger.

"What trouble?" I asked.

"About Mis' Habersham and Sam Weekes. Some galoot hex bin' fillin' up Ben's mind with suspicions about her, and they say he ain't spoke to a soul this three days. I met him by the court-house and he was ez white as raw cotton, and was talkin' to himself. When a man does that it's real dangerous; there's trouble afoot, to be sure. I hankered some to stay and see it out, but I'd fixed to see old Mackenzie over to my place about them steers, and if I missed him he'd be worse to deal with than a rattler. I never did see such a man, plumb locoed he is at times. Gedge is very sore about the Habershams; he's stuck on Mis' Habersham himself, eh?"

I thought Sibley Ranger was safer at Double Mountain Fork than in town, and said so.

"Waal, I desay," he drawled, "my tongue's my cross, and it'll get me into trouble shore, I own it. But if you hurry up you may see the crisis. The crisis is comin' along, and I ain't a jedge of crises. There was that look about Ben Habersham which naturally eventuates in the deadly exhibition of a double-pronged scatter-gun, or I'm the closest example of high discretion in Northwest Texas. So long!"

I reached town by way of Wolf Creek at sundown, and the first man I saw on the street was Ginger Gillette. The city marshal seemed worried.

"Mr. Gillette, I fear your responsibilities are weighing on you," I said. "You are wearing a sad expression this moment. Who's been shot and killed since I saw you?"

"Peace reigns so far," said Gillette, "and there's no such demand for coffins as to raise the price, yet awhile."

"I met Sibley Ranger as I came in, Gillette, and he let on there was trouble stickin' out a foot in town."

"Blank fool Ranger's right," said Gillette. "It's about Habersham. Some woman hex been raisin' blazes in my town by speakin' to him, and if I could locate her I'd do some talkin'. Poor Ben's mad; he ain't spoke to Mis' Habersham for three days, and he caymps out on the verandy. She kem to me weepin' some, and she let on there'd be killin' if he warn't calmed down. She vows she don't know what's wrong with him, and I just couldn't tell her—I couldn't!"

"Then you think there's nothing in it?" I asked. I got off my horse and walked toward the busiest part of the town with him.

"Not on her side," said Ginger, scratching his red head; "she's only silly. But Weekes ain't no innocent. Barrin' that I'm responsible for the peace of this locality, I'd jest as soon as not attend his funeral. I never had no weakness for him. There's a deal too much of the hundred per cent usurer about him."

"Does he know he's likely to die suddenly?"

"I told him so," said Gillette, "and so did Smith, my deputy. He ain't put foot outside his store since the day before yesterday, but otherwise he shows grit, and is tolerable easy, to jedge by appearances."

We came by Weekes' store.

"There he is now," said Gillette. "But the store isn't lighted up. He knows better than to do that."

I touched him on the arm. "You're thinking more how to save Habersham than Weekes, Ginger."

"To be sure," said Ginger. "I ain't stuck on Weekes, and I like Ben all right, and I reckon I like Mis' Habersham enough not to want to see her a widow; for the truth is, she loves Ben well."

"I think you'd better find an excuse for locking one of them in the calaboose," I said, "or you might pick a row with Weekes and lay him out for a spell."

Ginger Gillette stopped suddenly. "I say, old man, that's a notion! Blamed if I don't think it over. I want peace in Painted Rock. I've my own reputation to think of. Painted Rock says to me: 'Ginger Gillette, give me peace, put down riots and let peaceful citizens live till their time comes.' And I say: 'Right! That's my idea when I took their time comes.' After supper I'll interview Mr. Weekes; for so far Habersham ain't committed any open act of rebellion ag'in' me, and I can't arrest him on suspish, not much!"

And then we parted, I went to Hamilton's for my supper, and he to consider how to save his reputation for peace and law and order. It came nearly being wounded badly in less than two hours.

After supper and a smoke at Hamilton's I walked across the Plaza and to and fro there for a while and then strolled to Main-st. Habersham's house was in the outskirts of the town to the northwest, and to get to Weekes' from his place he had to go through Main-st. and to get to South-st. where the store was. My luck happened to make me the first man to see Habersham that night and when I saw him I was shaken up. He was white and fevered, haggard and strained, and his eyes were like live coals. That might have passed, perhaps, but he was one of the few men in the town who never carried a weapon of any kind. He never saw me as I passed, and for a moment I was paralyzed. I knew that he was going to Weekes' store, and that if he got there he or Weekes' would not survive the meeting. There were in the town would have said it was none of their business. There were others who would have been glad to see Weekes filled with lead. I had no liking for him; but I had for Habersham. I called to him suddenly.

"Mr. Habersham!"

He stopped dead, and I walked back to him. If I could only hold him in talk for a minute I might see Ginger Gillette or his deputy on the street. And in a minute anything might happen.

"What is it?" asked Habersham.

"Oh, by the way," I said, "I've just come down from Snyder, where I was staying with Chapman. He told me he wanted you to put him up a windmill."

This was a lie on the spur of the moment. Chapman cared about nothing but horses and poker, and Ennis Creek gave him all the water he wanted.

"I'm not in windmills any more," said Habersham thickly. "Oh, blank windmills! Oh, go to blazes!"

He tore his coat away from my hand and went fast, all the faster perhaps from my hindering him. There was only one thing to do, and I did it. I had not the least desire to get myself into difficulty, and if he saw me run ahead of him he was in the mood to kill me first and Weekes afterward. Nevertheless, I meant getting to the store before

he did. There was only one way to do it. I ran into the American Saloon, calling to Gedge as I did so. It is never advisable to run into any gambling-saloon in a hurry and without warning. The place was tolerably full, and Gedge was dealing faro.

"Hullo!" said "Keno." "What's the trouble?"

"Tell Gillette to come to Weekes' place now!" I cried, and with that I pulled aside the window-blind at the end of the room and jumped through the opening and left the crowd buzzing.

Habersham had to walk two hundred yards down Main-st. before the got to South-st. By going through the window I had one side of a triangle to his two, and though the open space was dark and littered with empty kerosene and fruit cans I made good time across the big barren lot. I felt sure I was a minute or two ahead of Ben when I came to the store. I thought as I ran.

"I'll make Weekes lock the door and lie low," I said. If he won't and kills Ben Habersham it will be against him."

But I prayed that Ginger Gillette would come quickly. This was his business, and he was in his element in dealing with such things. Perhaps I was a fool, and yet I saw poor Mrs. Habersham's face and remembered her as she was when she sat talking of the fruit and flowers of "God's country."

I ran into the store. Ginger Gillette and Smith were there before me. It seemed a miracle at the time, but I knew afterward that my words to "Keno" Gedge had had nothing to do with it.

The store was long and deep, and only one dim lamp lighted it. On one side were dry-goods on shelves and stacked in on the counter. The other side was filled with hardware, with shining tins, lamps and all kinds of household gear. The back part of the store was in deep shadow. It was full of casks and bales of all sorts. From the tie-beams hung clothes of various kinds, slickers or oilskins, long boots and some big cow-hats.

And I knew that Gillette and Weekes were having trouble. Weekes was tall and dark and wore a beard. Some women said he was a handsome man. Men as a rule did not like him. Gillette had owned to having no love for him.

"You've brought it on yourself," said Gillette, angrily, "and I'll have you know I'm city marshal!"

"Go to blazes!" replied Weekes. "You can't drive me, and you being marshal don't faze me worth a cent. If Habersham shows his nose here I'll kill him."

I heard that as I came in.

"Habersham' coming here with a shot-gun!" I cried. We heard steps even then, and I saw Weekes pull a six-shooter from his hip-pocket. With his left hand he made a motion to knock the lamp over.

What happened then was so sudden and so amazing that I fell back so that he held the barrel, and he struck Weekes upon the head a heavy blow with the stock. He fell heavily, and at that moment there was a shot, but who fired it I could not tell. And then Habersham appeared at the entrance. The lamp had little oil in it; but it blazed upon the floor, and by its flames, before Gillette threw slicker on them and trod them out, I saw Weekes laying on his back with a great red splash upon his face. Then there was darkness.

"My God!" said Habersham. He too had seen what I saw. I saw Habersham's figure wave against the outer light of the stars.

"I meant to kill him!" he said in a dreadful whisper. "And who's done it?"

"I have," said Gillette.

I sat down on a keg by the hardware counter, and as I did so Gillette lighter a match and another lamp. Then I heard quick light footsteps outside and Mrs. Habersham came running. She saw no one but Gillette, and he had his back turned. She thought he was Weekes. I knew she thought so, and was in dread what she would say. She did not see Habersham. If she spoke a word that tallied with the slanders of the town, he would kill her. But she cried:

"Mr. Weekes, oh, sir—"

And then she fainted dead away in her husband's arms. These words had saved her and saved him, and in this state of madness they came, I felt, like cooling waters; for they expressed the truth of her innocence, if they said nothing as to the blamelessness of the man whose body lay stretched upon the floor.

"Good God!" said Ben Habersham "good God!"

He dropped his gun and held the poor woman in his arms.

"Take her away before she comes to, Ben," said Gillette. And Habersham carried her outside. I followed him and helped him with her. But suddenly he said:

"Don't touch her!"

He picked her up in his arms like a baby and almost ran up the solitary road. I wondered that there was no one about. They must have come to the conclusion at the American saloon that I was crazy and not to be taken notice of. I walked back into the store. I couldn't understand how it was that Weekes was dead. I had seen Smith strike him with the butt of his gun. Who had fired the shot?

Gillette was sitting on the dry-goods counter, swingin his heels and whistling. "That was well played," he said coolly. "There will be peace in Painted Rock this night."

Smith annexed a quarter cigar from a box and salved his conscience by dropping a nickel.

"Who killed Weekes?" I asked.

"Nobody killed him," said Gillette scornfully. "I thought you tumbled to the racket. He ain't dead. Smith downed him with the butt, and I pulled off to give it reality."

Weekes groaned.

"Call that dead, eh!" asked Gillette callously.

"But I saw a thundering lot of blood," I said, "I'm sure I did."

"Tomayto ketchup only," said Ginger Gillette. "I like finish. Tomayto ketchup, nothing more."

Weekes sat up. He looked horrid.

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